

## **Curling in Canada: From Gathering Place to International Spectacle**

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Résumé de l'article

Le curling fait partie intégrante de la vie de nombreux Canadiens en hiver, et nos curleurs dominent la scène mondiale. Malgré tout, le sujet n'a pas fait l'objet de beaucoup d'études. S'appuyant sur le peu de publications dans ce domaine et présentant une étude réalisée dans des clubs de curling de l'Ouest canadien, l'auteure vise à combler cet écart en explorant l'évolution du rôle du curling dans la construction des identités sociales à l'échelle locale et nationale. Elle soutient que même si le curling joue un rôle indéniable, quoique en sourdine, dans la construction de l'image du Canada, cette identité fait de plus en plus l'objet d'un certain nombre de pressions internes et externes qui peuvent mener à un grand changement.

**Heather Mair**

***Curling in Canada:  
From Gathering Place to International Spectacle***

**Abstract**

*Curling is a central part of winter life for many Canadians and our curlers dominate the world stage. Yet the topic remains dramatically under-studied. Building on the limited writing in this area and presenting research undertaken in curling clubs across western Canada, the author seeks to help fill this gap by exploring the changing role of curling in the construction of social identities at the local community and national level. It is argued that while curling plays an undeniable, if muted, role in the construction of Canada's image, this identity is being increasingly subjected to a number of internal and external pressures that have the potential to lead to great change.*

**Résumé**

*Le curling fait partie intégrante de la vie de nombreux Canadiens en hiver, et nos curleurs dominent la scène mondiale. Malgré tout, le sujet n'a pas fait l'objet de beaucoup d'études. S'appuyant sur le peu de publications dans ce domaine et présentant une étude réalisée dans des clubs de curling de l'Ouest canadien, l'auteure vise à combler cet écart en explorant l'évolution du rôle du curling dans la construction des identités sociales à l'échelle locale et nationale. Elle soutient que même si le curling joue un rôle indéniable, quoique en sourdine, dans la construction de l'image du Canada, cette identité fait de plus en plus l'objet d'un certain nombre de pressions internes et externes qui peuvent mener à un grand changement.*

On Thursday, February 23, 2006, Newfoundland's Education Minister, Joan Burke announced that the province's schools would be closed the following day. Children would be free to watch Brad Gushue's team from that province as they competed in the gold medal curling game at the 2006 Olympics. The Gushue "rink" won the gold and the women's team came home with bronze. These athletes not only joined a long history of international domination by Canadian curlers, they became something close to national heroes. These athletes triumphed in a quintessential

Canadian sport; a victory made even sweeter in light of the disappointing results in men's hockey.

Curling has an image as an accessible sport. It is often portrayed as small-town, classless, gender-neutral, and open to all. The following introduction to the sport was posted on the website of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in order to explain curling to potential fans in the lead up to the 2006 Olympic Games:

In 1998, a Canadian golf pro, a plumber, an electrician and a writer swept their way to silver in the men's Olympic curling event, when Mike Harris's rink finished second at the Nagano Games. A rarity among world-class athletes, most curlers have day jobs and families to raise. "The curler is your neighbour," says Harris. "It's just a small-town game. It's a grassroots game that everyone can identify with."<sup>1</sup>

The Canadian Curling Association states that 872,000 people curl in Canada and 56 percent of those are regular curlers in that they curl ten or more games per year (CCA 2004b). While many Canadians are not actively engaged in curling, as Russell notes, most, if not all Canadians know what curling is and have at the very least, "some sort of distant connection to the sport" (2004, 2). Yet, despite both its visibility and remarkably long history in Canada (the first organized sporting club in North America was the Montréal Curling Club established in 1807), curling is under-studied. In particular, its social and cultural significance has not been investigated to the same extent as other sports, most notably ice hockey (see Gruneau and Whitson 1993). Certainly, assessments of its importance abound from within the sport itself as writers, curlers, and historians celebrate its development with many popular writings (see, for instance, Maxwell 2002, Pezer 2003, Russell 2004, and Sonmor 1992). Of the more academically-oriented curling studies, Wieting and Lamoureux (2001) highlight both the importance of curling to Canadians and the dominance that its elite athletes enjoy worldwide. Reeser and Berg (2004) investigate self-reported injury patterns among competitive male curlers and Willoughby and Kostuk (2004) explore the strategies of elite players. However, there is little direct research that considers identity, the role of the local club or even the changing social and cultural aspects of the sport. In addition, only a handful of studies are concerned primarily with volunteers, a staple of curling activity at both the local and the national level (see, for instance, Farrell, Johnston, and Twynam 1998, Twynam, Farrell, and Johnston 2002/2003).

Alongside this limited academic attention to the sport is evidence that members of curling clubs across the country, and even the federal government, have long understood and supported its role in community life. In

1967, as part of the Centennial celebrations, the Canadian government invested in the financing and construction of many recreation facilities. The building or upgrading of curling rinks were also significant parts of these Centennial Projects (McFarland 1970). More recently, a survey of 491 clubs by the Canadian Curling Association (CCA 2004a) indicates that nearly 60 percent operate in the non-curling season, providing both rented and donated space for community events, ranging from wedding receptions to walkathons to live local theatre. The Saskatchewan Curling Association points out that curling has “made a unique and valuable contribution to the social and sport history of this province... curling was a way of life during the long cold winter months” (1991, viii).

Thus, there remains a need for more in-depth assessments of curling, particularly from a social and cultural standpoint. Further, curling has been undergoing dramatic changes as it begins to co-exist on two increasingly independent levels: as a community-based sport and as an increasingly professionalized, commercialized, Olympic-level endeavour. This paper explores these changes and considers their implications in light of the relationship between curling and identity formation.

The role of sport in the formation of social and cultural identities is, like curling, also relatively under-studied. Nonetheless, those works seeking to draw our attention to these complex relationships provide guidance throughout this analysis. For instance, Whitson (2001, 231) comments on the role of sport in (Canada’s) national identity:

...national identities are amalgams of ideas and images of “the nation” that ordinary people can identify with. These emerge out of communal historical experiences and practices, and out of stories of famous triumphs (and tragedies) that are retold in the media and in popular conversation till they become, literally, the stuff of legends.... The association of sports with familiar places, with seasonal rhythms, even with particular weekends on the calendar, all contribute to a sense of the endurance of the imagined community of the nation.

What role does the sport of curling play in the construction of this enduring image? What are the implications of the changing nature of the sport of curling in terms of the ongoing construction of local and national identities? Kidd (1982, 1996) describes the changing role of sport in shoring up national culture, particularly through modern forms of competition and sees these changes as the outcomes of power struggles. In this paper, I argue that while curling has an undeniable, if muted, role in the construction of Canada’s image, both of itself and in terms of how others see it, this role is complex and subject to a number of internal and exter-

nal tensions that are leading to great change. Curling exists at the local, national, and international levels in different forms and for different purposes. While it may be considered by many to be an unexciting sport, it is generally deemed, even by non-curlers, as characteristically Canadian: a social, winter sport built upon values of skill, amateurism, patience, sportsmanship, and non-violence played extremely well by "everyday" people.

Yet, contradictory forces are at work in the world of curling, both in regard to its place in the national psyche as well as its future at the local, national, and international levels. While small, rural clubs are in financial trouble and membership and, in particular, membership fees, are not increasing significantly enough to offset the growing costs of maintenance, there is a dramatic growth in media, sponsorship, and spectator attention at the national and international levels (CCA 2004a, 2004b). Recent and well-publicized wins like the men's Olympic gold combined with the prominence of Canadian women's teams as well as the success of senior and junior teams on the international stage suggest that curling is poised to attract even more attention from international media and capital through sponsorship opportunities. As curling undergoes the development of a dual existence (at the level of community gathering place as well as international spectacle), what are the implications for identity and our national sense of self?

There are four main parts to this paper. First, curling is introduced using major works on the sport and briefly tracing its development along the trajectory of Canadian colonial settlement, particularly by Scottish immigrants in the western part of the country. While this is by no means meant to be an extended treatise on the history of curling in Canada (see, for instance, Creelman 1950, Howell and Howell 1969, Maxwell 2002, Metcalfe 1987, Mott and Allardyce 1989, Murray 1982, Pezer 2003, Wetherell and Kmet 1990) it is important to understand the history of curling, in particular its social roots. Curling is often described, although mostly for the benefit of curlers and historians of Canadian social development, as being distinctly Canadian. However, as noted above, it has not been considered in sufficient depth from within the fields of leisure studies, cultural studies, or even the sociology of sport. Investigating the historical circumstance of curling allows for a deeper consideration of the modern connection between sport and identity construction in Canada.

In the second section, the paper outlines outcomes from the first stage of a research project<sup>2</sup> seeking to understand the role of curling and curling clubs in rural Canadian life.<sup>3</sup> Although many small curling clubs are at risk of closing, they still provide a community gathering place for many Canadians. Results of research undertaken in six western Canadian

communities in the winter of 2006 are presented in order to illustrate how the local curling rink is both a fundamental part of Canada's settlement history and the social fabric of small town Canadian life. In this way, the clubs reinforce our historical sense of self as a relatively rural, social, wintry nation. In addition, the sport is built upon both a sense of "sports-manship" (for example, teams shake hands before and after every game, both teams are expected to meet after the match for drinks, and play is largely self-refereed) as well as strong regional foundations (for instance, while not the site of the first clubs, major developments in the sport came from the West, particularly Manitoba and Saskatchewan). Add to this an enduring sense of honour that comes from having embraced the very worst of Canadian weather, and it is possible to see how curling complements the Canadian self-image.

Third, insights from some of the writing in the areas of sociology of sport are used to consider the forces working to alter Canadian curling. As it becomes increasingly recognized and followed internationally, Canadians hold centre stage as dominant players and leaders in its development and evolution. The growing professionalization and commercialization through sponsorship, extended television exposure, and the increase in prize-oriented competitions, is leading to the construction of major curling competitions as "spectacles." Further, these forces are supplemented by efforts to build and improve the science of the sport through equipment development and marketing, standardizing playing techniques and rules, and analyzing the game and its elite players through the use of statistics. While these changes may be seen by some as an inevitable price for national and international exposure, the research presented below identifies a feeling, at least at the grassroots level, that there is a widening gap between Canadian curling's global status and its rural roots. The last section concludes the discussion by asking whether these seemingly contradictory forces influencing the development of curling can co-exist and what this means for the future of the sport.

### **The (Canadian) Settler's Game**

Curling has a history in Canada that stretches back longer than the nation's formal existence. Given our protracted engagement with the game, it is perhaps no surprise that we have come to associate ourselves with its evolution and development. Howell and Howell's study of sports and games in Canadian life (1969; see also Creelman 1950, Metcalfe 1987, Mott and Allardyce 1989, Wetherell and Kmet 1990) attributes the refinement of curling among some of the more prominent contributions that Canadians have made to sport around the world. In the latter part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this game, thought to be brought to Canada by Scottish troops and settlers, made its mark from east to west. One of the first

recorded games was held on the St Lawrence River in 1807 (Howell and Howell 1969, 36). As noted above, the first club in Canada was formed by 20 curlers in Montréal in 1807. As Metcalfe (1987) points out, the origins of curling were rather elite as the first clubs were created by the more affluent members of society (see also Morrow and Wamsley 2005). Other clubs began to spring up in Ontario (Kingston and Toronto in 1820 and 1836, respectively), in the Maritimes (Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1843, and Fredericton, New Brunswick established a club of 8 curlers in 1856) and others in parts of Québec. As Howell and Howell (1969) noted, these early curlers were often mocked by other settlers from non-British origins; they include the following quotation from a farmer:

Today I saw a band of Scotchmen, who were throwing large balls of iron like tea-kettles on the ice, after which they cried "Soop! Soop!" and then laughed like fools. I really believe they are fools. (35)

It was in the western parts of the country, however, where the popularity of curling took hold in the greatest way, moving from frozen lakes and rivers to covered, outdoor facilities to fully enclosed buildings with artificial ice. Wetherell and Kmet (1990) point out that by the 1890s, clubs organizing curling in Alberta made it second only to hockey in popularity as it was "inexpensive and accessible and by the interwar years, it had come to symbolize prairie rural social life like no other game" (154). Pezer (2003) describes the importance of curling not just in western Canadian settlement, but also in terms of how the people of the Prairies see themselves today:

The game of curling is a unique component of the social history of the Prairies. From its sparse, random beginnings more than 150 years ago, to its present sophisticated level, curling defines the character and spirit of the Prairies and its people. Its requirements of self-discipline, persistence, patience, and co-operation parallel the qualities of early settlers, and it has been linked with almost every aspect of prairie life—political, religious and commercial. (1–2)

Probably the most lasting and distinguishing aspect of curling is the bonspiel, or multi-day, multi-team curling tournament or competition. As soon as clubs began to spring up on the Canadian landscape, bonspiels were held as curlers braved winter conditions in order to travel to other clubs in neighbouring communities (or provinces) for matches. These competitions were major social events throughout the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1866, a year before Confederation, an international curling match between Canada and the United States was held (Howell and

Howell 1969, 38). Not surprisingly, the spread of curling across the country is directly related to the development of the railway. At the time, rail travel provided the easiest access to other areas, and curlers traveled across great distances—with their own rocks (curling stones).<sup>4</sup> Redmond and many others (1990, 114; see also Creelman 1950, Howell and Howell 1969, Maxwell 2002, Murray 1982, Pezer 2003) point out that curling is just one example of Canada's changing geography and social life as the railway was built, piece by piece, across the nation.

However, it should be noted that even before rail travel allowed for competitions between communities, intra-community matches were frequent. Pezer (2003, 11) describes common ways of forming competitive matches, including married vs. single, Grits vs. Tories, smokers vs. non-smokers. She also describes one particularly popular type of match, Canada vs. the "Old Country," where Canadian-born curlers played against the settlers who introduced the game (see also Creelman 1950). Local community identity developed around curling as access to more communities through rail, and later the automobile eased winter travel and allowed for the game to evolve and the standards of play to improve through consistent and increased competitions (Howell and Howell 1969, Metcalfe 1987, Morrow and Wamsley 2005, Mott and Allardyce 1989). Communities sought to be known as curling communities where the competition and the hospitality were reputed to be worth the journey. Pezer describes the pride associated with hosting a bonspiel during the curling season as well as the expected reciprocation for visiting teams:

The decision to host a bonspiel marked a major evolutionary step towards a more sophisticated level of curling competition. Communities planned for months and worked hard to provide the best ice possible, offer prizes of significant value, and show the finest hospitality to visiting teams. Bonspiel success became an important yardstick of a community's prestige, and one mark of a bonspiel's reputation was the number of visiting teams who participated. The expected, if unwritten, rule was the communities would support each other's bonspiels. (Pezer 2003, 111)

As sports sociologists make clear, it is also important to realize that all sports are used to imbue participants with values and ideals deemed acceptable by leaders in society (see, for instance, Kidd 1982, 1996, Metcalfe 1987, Morrow and Wamsley 2005). In the case of curling, it was hoped that the game would allow for the spread of Victorian values as brought to Canada by the British settlers although it did mix with the frontier mentality to form a distinctly Canadian value set incorporating teamwork, self-discipline and a sense of openness and democratic freedom



(Pezer 2003, 12, see also Wetherell and Kmet 1990). As Mott and Allardyce (1989) account, curling "...tested a host of praiseworthy attributes including vigour, endurance, determination, power of concentration, ability to plan strategy and capacity to work with others" (8) and thereby served to reinforce British-Protestant social values.

Further, religion also had a place in the sport at this time and Pezer (2003) describes the role of the church, particularly the local chaplain, and the mutually supportive relationship between the church and the local curling club (see also Mott and Allardyce 1989). The chaplain could use the opportunity of the bonspiel to host a church service in order to convey moral lessons and the club used the connection to the church to promote curling as an appropriate social activity. This lasted until the 1960s and 1970s when overall church membership was dropping and Sunday competitions eliminated the traditional bonspiel church service (Pezer 2003, 92-95).

Thus, during the dramatic period of Canada's growth as a new nation, curling provided an outlet for hard-working settlers to mix, socialize and share their values throughout their small communities and, increasingly, with neighbouring communities. Much like the quotation from Olympic curler Mike Harris cited at the beginning of the paper, there is an enduring image that all curlers, even international champions, are everyday people. As is described next, recent research with small curling communities illustrates that this is still very much the case in many parts of Canada.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Gathering Place**

In this section, some of the outcomes of research undertaken with six curling clubs in western Canada are presented.<sup>6</sup> Over the course of this research, I met with curlers who were currently holding executive positions at their local clubs. In the winter of 2006, I spent one full bonspiel weekend in each community. Informal interviews were conducted and participant observation techniques were used throughout the weekend events. A brief picture of three of the clubs and communities that were part of this study, one each from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta is presented below so as to demonstrate the continued role of curling clubs as gathering places in Canada. It should be noted that the names of the communities are pseudonyms.

#### *Cedar, Manitoba*

In Cedar, a village in Manitoba with a total population of 656 in 2001 (Statistics Canada 2001), the entire community gathers at the curling club for one long weekend a year.<sup>7</sup> In 2006, the bonspiel ran at the end of

March and was the club's 100<sup>th</sup>. This bonspiel is the major event of the winter for this community, hosting men's, ladies', and master's (seniors 60 years of age and older) teams. The club hosting the event works with the minor sports association in order to use the linked arena ice to turn their "three sheeter"<sup>8</sup> into a nine-sheet rink or facility, hosting more than seventy teams. Volunteers from the local hospital and museum, some of whom were curlers, were responsible for providing the food as well as staffing the canteen and bar. These groups share the profits with the curling club. Over the course of this weekend, the club opens its doors to the community and generations of families play together, teams of teenagers take on their parents and past and present community members spend the weekend together. A Friday night banquet was held at the community hall, the local fire department hosted a breakfast on Saturday morning in the fire hall, and the club hosted a karaoke night that evening. With the exception of the ice-maker,<sup>9</sup> every aspect of the bonspiel, as well as general club activity, is run and organized by volunteers.

Observation as well as discussions with curlers and club members made clear the dependence upon volunteers to make things happen, both during bonspiels and also in regular season league play. All club members know they are expected to take a shift at the bar or in another aspect of the bonspiel and that if they cannot make their shift, they are responsible for finding a replacement. There were people from all over the region, many of whom return to play in this bonspiel every year. One curler discussed traveling each year from the city of Winnipeg just to be part of the bonspiel. He noted that he used to come with a team from Winnipeg but when his teammates no longer wanted to make the (two and a half hour) journey, he was given a spot on one of the rinks entered by the local hotel. He and other curlers consistently mentioned the importance of being part of this community event. Further, locals—even non-curlers—had come to the curling club for coffee or lunch to watch the matches, play cards, and visit with the people who had returned to the community for this particular weekend.

### *Ash, Saskatchewan*

The town of Ash had 1758 people in 2001 (Statistics Canada 2001) and hosts its annual mixed (teams of two females and two males, of any age) bonspiel in early April.<sup>10</sup> While not as large as the Cedar bonspiel, this is obviously also a social event for the whole community. Families are reunited for the weekend and groups of friends who do not ordinarily curl together enter teams to increase the number of entries and enhance play. In terms of running the bonspiel, volunteers are again at the core. For instance, in 2006, teams were responsible for bringing pies or sandwiches for sale at the club over the weekend. Volunteers ran the bar in two hour

shifts, and the food counter was run and operated during the bonspiel by the Canoe Club to aid in their effort to raise funds for their annual high school trip. Over the course of my time there, active volunteers would be working in the background, selling draw tickets to fundraise for the club, heading to the community hall to help set up the food trays and arrange the tables for the Saturday night dance (referred to as a "cabaret"). Among the curlers at the bonspiel were the local mixed high-school provincial champions.

Observation and discussions with curlers over the course of this bonspiel made it clear that family was a key theme. Indeed, "curling families" were local legends and the subject of nearly mythical status. One family I spent time with in Ash was so famous that one only needed to mention the father and family name when describing a particular curling shot and everyone knew what was being described. In order to raise funds, this club sold naming rights for tables and many families or groups of friends bought a table, generally to honour a curler who had passed away. This person's name remains on the table and the legends continue. Moreover, the significance of putting the name of a family member or friend on a curling rock, table, or scoreboard might be thought of as reflecting a connection to the broader community of curling as well as to the club, a sort of "vested interest."<sup>11</sup>

### *Maple, Alberta*

In Maple, Alberta, a town with 1762 inhabitants as of 2001 (Statistics Canada 2001), the annual men's bonspiel was held over the last weekend of January 2006.<sup>12</sup> This four sheet rink is connected to the local hockey arena, has a large bar and seating area with a long line of windows stretching the length of the curling ice. Hosting teams of men from Maple, as well as many neighbouring communities, the event included a banquet on Saturday night, featuring a roast beef dinner and a series of raffles for door prizes donated from local businesses. Just as with the other bonspiels visited, there was a large collection of donations from local businesses. Most bonspiels offer a mix of cash prizes for the top winners of the various divisions or "events" and prizes donated from local businesses. This bonspiel in particular offered a wide array of prizes, everything from T-shirts and poker sets to Calgary Flames hockey tickets and wall-sized mirrors embossed with beer company logos. The volunteer organizer of this particular bonspiel explained that there was an unwritten expectation among small clubs, that teams be sent to one another's bonspiels (care is taken to avoid offering bonspiels on conflicting weekends) in order to support all of the clubs in the area. In return, there is an expectation that the ice will be of adequate quality, there will be some form of entertainment (and/or a good meal), and a sufficient number of high-quality prizes.

Having presented brief sketches of three of the studied clubs, it is also important to note briefly some key themes that came from studying these clubs and being at the bonspiels. Three main themes are outlined briefly below: amateurism and sportsmanship, socializing, and volunteerism. These themes relate directly to certain social values. These values were built into the sport by the Scottish settlers who developed it, and they continue to be fostered within these small clubs. Moreover, they are central components of Canada's sense of identity.

#### *Amateurism and Sportsmanship: Game Protocol*

As mentioned at the outset of the paper, curlers shake hands before and after every game. This occurs regardless of the level of play, from small community bonspiels to Olympic matches. As the game is played with alternating teams taking shots at the rings on the other end of the curling sheet, the curler who is preparing to take her/his shot will generally move his/her opponent's next rock into an area where it can be easily accessed by that opponent when it is her/his turn.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of the level of the game and the skills at work, curlers are generally known to compliment their opponents on good shots, especially if they are of a high degree of difficulty. After the game, teams are expected to sit together for a "post match" drink. While undertaking research at the clubs, these rules and unwritten expectations were made clear to me and were an obvious source of pride; a way of distinguishing curling from other sports.

#### *Socializing: A Part of Club Infrastructure*

The physical layout of the club is generally designed so that curling can be watched while socializing, eating, drinking, playing cards, or watching curling on the club's television. Further, any meals and/or dances that are held in conjunction with the bonspiels are generally also held in-house. The one exception to this was Cedar where, due to the large number of curlers participating in the bonspiel, the banquet was served in two stages at a local hall not far from the club. During my time in the clubs, I observed a constant movement of curlers within the clubs. For instance, a curler might move from the bar to a table to visit a friend, over to the windows to watch other teams curl, and finally to sit with his/her team to share a story or two about their last game. Also, as smoking has been banned in all clubs, curlers who smoke are moving inside and outside the club.

One element of club infrastructure that is unchanging across the clubs participating in this study was the construction and location of the tables. The tables are always big enough (or can be easily put together) to seat eight. This is so that two teams can sit together in order to share the customary drink after playing a match. On the single occasion when I saw

a deviation from this practice, it was noted and discussed by other curlers around the room and was described to me as a deliberate slight from one team to another.

### *Volunteerism: The Key to Club Survival*

Each of the clubs I visited functioned almost entirely on volunteer labour. With the exception of the ice-maker and, in two cases, the bar/food staff, every aspect of organizing, promoting, and running a bonspiel (as well as regular season play) is undertaken entirely by club member volunteers.<sup>14</sup> Fundraising, such a prominent part of the life of these clubs, is also the purview of volunteers and is a consistent part of bonspiel weekends. Activities may be coordinated by an executive group or may be a much more spontaneous undertaking at the will of one volunteer. Throughout the research, it was made consistently clear that volunteering, while increasingly a challenge for small communities, was not only an essential component of the club's existence, but was something to be proud of, especially as it was seen to be what differentiated small clubs from their larger, urban counterparts.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, even this brief description of club life in these small, western Canadian communities illustrates that while the local clubs are facing financial challenges, there is a significant connection to community life and these clubs are still operating in much the same way as their settlement predecessors did. They are still, although less so, central hubs of winter recreation in this country and the activities, particularly at bonspiels, means that they are still part of our social fabric. The social values of volunteerism, socializing, and sportsmanship are instilled at every level of activity in the local club. When Canadians watch their elite curlers dominate the world stage, there is a sense that this is a sport that reflects Canadian values, particularly those of amateurism, sportsmanship, and volunteerism. However, there is a tension between this aspect of curling and its relationship to Canadian social life and the growing commercialization and professionalization of the sport. It is to this tension that the paper now turns.

### **Changing Values? The Shifting Place of Curling in Canada**

While much has been made of the commercialization and professionalization of hockey in Canada, the same forces are at work, although to a lesser extent, in the world of curling. It is important to realize that these forces are not new. Indeed, the growth in the value of bonspiel prizes led to discussions within the Dominion Curling Association (established in 1935—the forerunner to the Canadian Curling Association, established in 1967) about seriously considering the implications of the growing

commercialization of the sport and to set out firm guidelines regarding what constituted an amateur curler (see especially Metcalfe 1987, Morrow and Wamsley 2005, Pezer 2003). Murray (1982) notes the tensions within the sport between its history as amateur-based and open to all and the push to commercialize the sport, even at the local level:

In a country as large and diverse as Canada, curling developed on a regional basis, with a welter of sponsored local and district bonspiels. The prizes became so rich—they varied from motor cars to cash prizes of \$20,000—that the effect of such rewards on play had to be questioned. On one hand, they encouraged skills and play among all classes of society; on the other, they encouraged commercial and professional attitudes to the sport, which many curlers felt to be not in the interests of the game. (149)

The most dramatic force at work in changing curling is television. Curling on television began with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) broadcast of the final draw of the 1960 Brier, the national men's championship. When The Sports Network (TSN) came onto the televised sports scene it quickly made room for curling in its coverage of Canadian sports (Lukowich, Ramsfjell, and Somerville 1990, 61). Currently, TSN will typically cover the round robin matches during a national or international championship (particularly if it is held on Canadian soil), and the CBC broadcasts semi-final and final matches.<sup>16</sup>

Television coverage of sports, while once feared as potentially undercutting attendance at live sports events, has broadened its exposure and encouraged growth in the number of people who follow professional teams and competitions. According to the Canadian Curling Association, more than 3.5 million Canadians watch curling on television, with 1.5 million reporting that they watch curling once a month (CCA 2004b). Thus, there are roughly four times as many Canadians watching curling than playing it. This is a significant development for the sport and will undoubtedly lead to continued changes in the game. For instance, curling rules were changed in the early 1990s in order to allow for more rocks to be in play at one time.<sup>17</sup> This made the game more challenging and, importantly, more exciting for spectators. In addition, curlers playing in national and international competitions wear television microphones so viewers can hear the team's discussions, understand the more subtle aspects of strategy and get to know the personalities of the players. Further changes to the game that reflect a desire to make it more viewer-friendly may include recent suggestions to reduce play from 10 ends to 8 ends.<sup>18</sup>

As Whitson argues, regular television coverage not only brings the sport heroes into the home, it turns them into celebrities and fans are drawn into, "the serial narratives that are the sporting seasons" (2001, 255). However, with television coverage comes increased sponsorship. As Murray (1982) notes, corporate sponsorship in curling was an outgrowth of the increasingly expensive prizes given at bonspiel competitions. In addition, the nature of travel in this country as well as financial challenges associated with mounting a national competition means that the role of sponsorship in defraying the cost of hosting major curling events is pivotal. Wieting and Lamoureux describe the challenge presented by pressures to keep curling close to its beginnings and the growing pull of sponsorship and spectator numbers by promoting and marketing curling in Canada and around the world (2001, 141). These authors argue that a balance must be struck between keeping the grassroots appeal of the sport alive and embracing "professionalization at the elite levels and aggressive and imaginative competition for national and international television airtime and sponsors..." (148).

As Whitson (2001, 219) argues, the corporate globalization of sport may indeed offer spectators and sports consumers a wider and better choice. However, it may also threaten the very existence of a particular "national sport." Even for those sports that succeed in carving out a place on the world stage, there are inherent tendencies towards commodification and professionalization. As Wieting and Lamoureux ask: What is the cost of these changes upon the integrity of this centuries old sport? (2001, 148).

While not wanting to overly romanticize the values discussed above as being closely associated with curling, at least at the local level, it is important to consider the potential implications of this shift. Next, three inter-related areas are discussed insofar as they have implications for identity: the growing international appeal of the sport; changing gender identities; and the growth of curling as a professional sport spectacle.

### *International Appeal and Professionalization*

Despite being a full Olympic medal sport in 1924, curling held demonstration sport status in 1932, 1988, and 1992, and again gained acceptance as a full medal sport in 1998. As part of this and other exposure at the international level, interest in curling is growing worldwide. At the 2006 Olympics, for example, there were teams from New Zealand, Sweden, Norway, Finland, the United States, Italy, Switzerland, Great Britain, and Germany. In addition, there are more than 45 member countries belonging to the World Curling Federation<sup>19</sup> as well as a wide variety of multinational and regional associations. Within this web of international curling relationships, Canada is clearly dominant.

Wieting and Lamoureux (2001, 150) point out that by virtue of having been brought into the Olympic fold, curling has gone through a by now familiar series of steps towards increased professionalization. While most other sports have already experienced the tensions that this creates, curling is a relative newcomer. From the codification of game rules and the standardization of venues, to the provision of prizes and monetary rewards for the elite players, hosting national and international curling competitions, for both women and men, means finding sponsors and being able to generate enough capital to sustain these events. This is clearly controversial and contrary to the amateur-oriented openness of the sport within local level curling circles and this tension was a prominent theme in the research with clubs in western Canada.

### *Image, Gender and Identity*

Even without direct exposure to curling, most Canadians would associate alcohol consumption with the theme of socializing (Howell and Howell 1969, Pezer 2003, Russell 2004, Wieting and Lamoureux 2001). While this is certainly an enduring association, the shifting nature of the game to a more professional, technique-driven, and international undertaking with increasingly higher rewards for elite play will have an undoubted impact upon that image. As well, there are changes in how women curlers are viewed. With the exception of some historical discussion about the challenges of sexism that women curlers faced, particularly in the early periods of settlement as clubs began to grow and as women struggled to become regular and valued curlers and contributors to club life (see especially Pezer 2003), there has been little reflection upon the gendered images of curling and how they might be re-framed under internationalized and commercialized exposure. Wieting and Lamoureux are an important exception in that they discuss the image of women curlers in their work, yet their comments from five years ago have already become somewhat outdated. These authors write:

The image of men depicted in Canadian national events such as the Brier is a hard-partying group of athletes. There is no such image presented of women, nor is there evidence of the eroticized images of women described for a number of modern sports such as gymnastics, and figure skating. (2001, 146)

In late 2005, news hit the curling world (and the popular media) that a semi-nude calendar of women curlers, including some Canadians, from around the world was being released for 2006 (with the proceeds going to help curling teams). This sparked debate within the curling community as some felt it helped bring even more attention to the sport, while others



saw it as one more downfall of curling's move away from its small town roots and social values.<sup>20</sup>

### *Curling as a Sports Spectacle*

The broadcast of curling competitions on television has grown dramatically in the past two decades. According to the Tim Hortons corporate website, now a major sponsor of the men's national championship (the Brier, Canada's most prominent curling championship), the per-minute television audience for the final averaged approximately 1.2 million viewers during the 2003 and 2004 championships. In the last few years, average live attendance records have been above the 250,000 mark. At the Brier in 2006, cash prizes to the top four teams included splitting \$130,000 CND, in addition to the \$14,000 each team receives from the Athlete Assistance Fund and for the "player cresting program."<sup>21</sup> For the next three years, sponsorship rights for the men's competitions will be shared by Tim Hortons and Monsanto Canada, an agricultural technology corporation.<sup>22</sup>

Curling is not a rich sport, especially when compared to others, but it is becoming increasingly rich when compared to its own past. Moreover, discussions about hosting major curling events are linked to economic development opportunities for the host cities and this is a theme not uncommon in the world of major sporting events. In addition, while not assessed directly here, also of concern is the added pressure placed upon all Canadian athletes who compete at the elite level to bring home wins from international competitions.<sup>23</sup> Further, pressure is placed upon local clubs as they seek to find adequate supports and resources necessary to send their teams to these top level competitions. Although it is perhaps rather premature to sound the death knell for locally-based, small-club curling with its attendant values, as it becomes more prominent on the world stage and more media and sponsorship spotlights shine on the sport, curling, and Canada's curlers seem poised to follow this trajectory.

### **Conclusion: From Gathering Place to International Spectacle— Can these Identities Co-exist?**

The Executive Vice-President of Marketing for Tim Hortons described the fit between the coffee and donut corporation and the grassroots sport in the following way:

The sport of curling, similar to the Tim Hortons brand, has a unique Canadian identity and community appeal. Becoming the title sponsor of the Tim Hortons Brier and the Tim Hortons Canadian Curling Trials was a great fit for us.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, even as the values underscoring curling may be changing, as its appeal grows as a spectator sport its quintessential Canadian status will place it in an increasingly unique and attractive position in the eyes of marketers and sponsors. Even in the smallest clubs there is still a feeling that elite curlers are regular people who might be found at a small club's bonspiel or who might be willing to sit and have a drink during some of the many social events that accompany even the most elite competitions.<sup>25</sup> The force of this attractiveness, however, risks changing the nature of the attraction forever. Thus, while there is still a feeling that the elite curlers are "normal," everyday people, on more than one occasion, the people I spoke with during the research described a sense of change. For instance, as one curler from Manitoba noted, most good curlers in local clubs feel like they could beat the well-known, elite curlers but they lack the money, time, and access to appropriate facilities and supports in order to achieve such a consistent level of play.

This discussion has explored what Kidd has called the "conundrum of culture" (1996, 266) that permeates most popular, national sports in Canada and is beginning to make its mark on curling. On the one hand, the values of small, locally-based clubs are appealing aspects of what many Canadians consider to be enduring, national qualities: amateurism, sportsmanship, socializing, volunteerism, and so on. On the other hand, the drive to make curling and Canadian curlers dominant in the global sports arena brings in contradictory tensions such as professionalization, standardization, and sponsorship.

These are new tensions for curling and so it presents a unique opportunity to investigate the complex relationship between sport and identity formation. There are, then, a number of opportunities for more research in this rather wide-open area. First, the subject of gender and gender construction over time demands attention. While many have argued that curling has a relatively long tradition of gender equity (Gruneau and Whitson 1993), especially in comparison to other sports such as hockey, the social construction of gender in this sport, as noted above, is already changing. Second, issues of race are nearly never discussed in the realm of curling and it is still, with few exceptions, dominated by white Anglo-Saxon players. Third, while the research presented here investigates rural clubs in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, regional differences across the country must also be understood and accounted for.

Fourth, scores of Newfoundland school children can still watch Brad Gushue and the rest of his team dominate the world stage and think that this is a sport to be admired and be part of because of its qualities of sportsmanship and openness. This image should be fostered and protected and the opportunity to participate in this lifelong sport extended to as

many people as possible. Yes, curling stands at a crossroads. In this situation rests an opportunity to protect the so-called grassroots foundations of the sport while tapping into the prospect for national glory and securing the support and recognition that our elite curlers deserve. How to navigate this cultural conundrum, however, must be the subject for continued and thoughtful analysis.

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### **Endnotes**

1. <http://www.cbc.ca/olympics/sports/curling/essentials/index.shtml>. Data retrieved April 15, 2006.
2. This is the first part of a national-level study of curling across Canada. The first part of the research, undertaken in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta in summer 2005 and winter 2006, was supported by a start-up grant from the University of Waterloo, and is presented here. The research will continue to the rest of Canada with the help of a three-year grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada/Sport Canada (Sport Participation Research Initiative).
3. While the "official" definition of rural, according to Statistics Canada, is a community with a population of less than 10,000, efforts were made for this study to locate communities with populations of less than 5,000 in order to find areas where the range of recreation facilities and opportunities for social activities might be fewer than in larger areas.
4. For a long time, certainly until the 1950s, many clubs, especially small clubs, did not supply rocks for curlers and they were expected to bring their own to competitions. One of the improvements in equipment and standardization of the game with indoor facilities was that the clubs supplied rocks as part of their facility, thereby enhancing the teams' ability to depend on a certain standard. The other side of this expectation, however, is the expense and many local clubs cannot afford to update or improve the rocks. On two occasions during the research, I overheard conversations between curlers reflecting on the low quality of rocks provided at a particular club.
5. While not directly a study of curling in Canadian small towns, Russell's (2004) book on curling takes him to many small communities in Canada. The discussion of what he found in those communities compliments and supports the material presented in this paper. See especially the chapter "Little White Houses,"

pp.189–211.

6. Club identification and selection occurred after I made a presentation about the proposed research at the Annual Congress of the Canadian Curling Association (June 2005). Representatives of clubs that might be interested in being part of this study were asked to identify themselves. In all, six clubs, two each from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta were selected to help with this western part of the study.
7. The material presented in this section is taken from field notes created during research in Cedar, Manitoba from March 24 to 26, 2006.
8. This is a commonly used short-hand phrase used in curling to denote the number of sheets of ice, or playing surfaces, that are available. For example, as the Cedar Curling Club usually has only three sheets of ice, it is referred to as a “three sheeteer.”
9. In curling, consistent quality of ice is essential to a successful bonspiel as well as attracting and retaining regular members to the club. If the club can afford only one paid position, it is the ice-maker. It should be noted, however, that in nearly every case, the ice-maker was helped by at least one other volunteer.
10. The material presented in this section is taken from field notes created during research in Ash, Saskatchewan from March 31 to April 2, 2006.
11. I'd like to extend my gratitude to Reviewer A for adding this important insight to my discussion about the purchasing of naming rights for paraphernalia around the club.
12. The material presented in this section is taken from field notes created during research in Maple, Alberta, from January 27 to 29, 2006.
13. Due to safety concerns, as well as the desire to avoid interrupting the routine a curler might go through before throwing the rock, this practice is becoming less common, especially at more elite levels of play.
14. Although primarily concerned with volunteer motivation at large curling events, papers by Farrell, Johnston, and Twynam (1998) and Twynam, Farrell, and Johnston (2002/2003) report similar findings.
15. Curlers in small clubs described the fundamental difference between urban and rural clubs as being the volunteer components. In urban clubs, as it was described to me by rural curlers, the membership fees are higher so that people might be paid to undertake the kind of work that volunteers would do in smaller clubs. This is not to say that urban clubs do not have a committed cadre of volunteers, not to mention the challenges associated with operating larger facilities (i.e. with more ice and activities to manage), as well as higher taxes and overall operating costs.
16. It should be noted that while the CBC has generally been the dominant carrier of televised curling competitions, the CCA has been in recent conflict with this organization, particularly in response to viewer outrage during the 2004–2005 season when the CBC moved some of its curling coverage to its cable channel, Country Canada, thereby requiring curling fans to have digital cable subscriptions. <http://www.cbc.ca/story/sports/national/2005/07/06/Sports/curlingdeal050706.html>. Data retrieved August, 22, 2005. However, in June of 2006, a deal between TSN and the Canadian Curling Association was announced whereby TSN

- will have exclusive Canadian rights to all major curling championships, beginning in 2008 and extending to 2014 (including the 2010 Olympics). [http://www.curling.ca/fan\\_central/worlds/2007/article.asp?id=1224102758](http://www.curling.ca/fan_central/worlds/2007/article.asp?id=1224102758). Data retrieved March 8, 2007.
17. The so-called three or four rock rule was adopted widely at both the elite and local levels in Canada essentially to allow curlers to put rocks outside or "above" the key scoring zone as guards. By preventing the removal of these guard rocks (the rule states that these rocks cannot be removed by an opponent until four rocks are in play, two from each team), this has allowed for curlers to keep rocks in the scoring zone longer, and thereby to increase the number of rocks in play. This makes the game more challenging to play and more interesting to watch.
  18. "Marketing the move to eight ends." *Globe and Mail* <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20061227.wsptweeks27> Data retrieved March 8, 2007.
  19. World Curling Federation website: <http://www.worldcurlingfederation.org>. Data retrieved April 15, 2006.
  20. *The Curling News* (December 2005) <http://www.thecurlingnews.com/calendar.html>. See also CBC news: <http://www.cbc.ca/story/sports/national/2005/10/31/Sports/curling-calendar051031>. Data retrieved April 13, 2006.
  21. Tim Hortons website: [http://www.timhortons.com/en/news/news\\_archive\\_2004g.html](http://www.timhortons.com/en/news/news_archive_2004g.html). Data retrieved March 16, 2006.
  22. Canadian Curling Association website: [http://www.curling.ca/fan\\_central/brier/2007/article.asp?id=1224102729](http://www.curling.ca/fan_central/brier/2007/article.asp?id=1224102729). Data retrieved April 15, 2006.
  23. See Pezer's discussion of the controversy surrounding the ill-fated Olympic camps developed in preparation for the 1988 Calgary Olympics (2003, 278–283).
  24. Tim Hortons website: [http://www.timhortons.com/en/news/news\\_archive\\_2004g.html](http://www.timhortons.com/en/news/news_archive_2004g.html). Data retrieved March 16, 2006.
  25. One of the most obvious examples of these social events is the "Briar Patch," essentially a large area that is created during each national men's competition where curlers and fans alike gather to drink, socialize, and listen to live entertainment and/or watch curling. In the case of women's national curling, the equivalent is the "Heart Stop Lounge," so named to reflect the competitions' title: "The Scotties Tournament of Hearts."

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